Keynote Speech I
The challenges and strategies for gender equality in Japan

Dr. Sumiko Iwao,
Professor of Social Psychology at Musashi Institute of Technology and
Member of the Council for Gender Equality

Today, I would like to discuss two things. Firstly, for the benefit of the overseas participants, I would like to spend some time elaborating on the present situation in Japan. Secondly, I would like to share my thoughts on some strategies for the future.

Let me start with the background and characteristics of gender-equal policy in Japan. Women and men's equality is assured under the Constitution of Japan. There is a legal guarantee, but present social circumstances are far from equal and many issues need to be resolved. For instance, women account for more than 40% of the labor force and many women work side by side with men, but a wage differential remains, based on promotion and seniority in terms of the number of years worked. Women are often forced to withdraw from the workforce due to the difficulty of balancing work and family. Obviously, no man would ever think of withdrawing from work because of child rearing. There is also the issue of violence against women. In terms of perception, both men and women believe that men are more favored than women in this society. Japan's GEM is way below the average of other countries. True gender equality has not been realized in Japan because too many issues remain unresolved.

Over the years, many policies have been adopted and implemented in Japan, but the majority of these have aimed at eliminating discrimination against women and opening doors to women in different fields. In other words, they have focused on protecting women's interests by providing equal opportunities in employment and education. However, the impact has been very limited. That is, gender inequality remains systematic in nature, and this mandates a comprehensive resolution. Contradictions and tensions occur whenever women attempt to combine participation in family life, their local communities, work places, schools and so forth. Hence, we cannot resolve these issues without an overall and holistic approach to reforming society structurally. Such a structural reform of society would also change men's lives and open up their options.

Recognizing that there are limits to coping with myriad of individual issues that are deeply
intertwined, and recognizing also the diversified needs of women today arising from changes in socio-economic circumstances, including the declining birthrate, aging, economic globalization and use of information, there is a need to systematically address the needs of women, and hence the need to establish a basic law on a gender-equal society that clearly states the Government’s vision of Japanese society. Accordingly, the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society was promulgated on June 28, 1999. The Japanese Government then set about compiling a basic plan based on this Basic Law, and placed realization of a gender-equal society as one of the most important priorities of the twenty-first century.

The resulting Basic Plan comprises a five-year program leading up to 2005 and mandates prefectural governments to come up with locally viable programs. It also mandates that a progress report be filed to the Diet. The Koizumi Government identified formation of a gender-equal society as a tool to conduct societal structural reform, and this is seen as being a very different approach.

The Japanese Government views a gender-equal society as one in which men and women are respected as individuals, where they are respected as equal partners to work together to take responsibility for society. Prime Minister Koizumi uses the term "kyosei" society, meaning a society of co-existence. A society in which regardless of gender, both men and women can participate equally in all areas of society and both are given the opportunity to use their abilities at work. Freedom of choice will be guaranteed and it is hoped that this society will be very viable and diverse.

The Basic Law has five pillars, which represent different issues. The first has to do with respect for the human rights of both men and women. One concrete issue is the need to eliminate all forms of violence against women as this is a very serious violation of human rights. November 25 has been designated by the UN General Assembly as a day to eliminate violence against women. A number of measures must be promoted, and many events are taking place with regard to November 25.

The second pillar is that social systems and practices should be gender neutral. The Japanese tax and social security systems have been built on an image of an outdated model of a standard family unit comprising a working man and a dependent woman and children. This is not gender neutral, and these systems need to be reformed to make them neutral.

The third pillar has to do with equal participation in policy formulation and decision-making.
Japan lags far behind other countries. In concrete terms, we have a numerical target of having 30% female representation among members of councils. Affirmative and active improvement measures have been spelled out, but they need to be implemented to be effective.

The fourth pillar has to do with balancing family life and other activities. This means introducing measures to help women balance both work and child caring. These should also enable men to participate in family activities. This will require reforms in the workplace and more flexible management of human resources in the employment system.

The fifth pillar has to do with the formation of a gender-equal society under international cooperation and collaboration. The Policy Dialogue on Gender Equality is just one manifestation of this basic stance. Japan attempts to provide official development assistance to different countries, but we should consider providing gender-sensitive assistance. Women’s contribution is demanded in peace building and peace maintenance, and gender perspectives should be part of the assistance we give to Afghan refugees for example.

Reorganization of the Central Government in January this year has greatly reinforced the National Headquarters for the Promotion of Gender Equality in terms of its structure and function. In Japan, basic policy making for promoting gender equality, including the deliberations and research involved therein, has not been mandated to an independent ministry in charge of gender equality. Instead, the Gender Equality Congress, one of four major congresses within the Cabinet Office, has been mandated to function instead of a separate ministry. The Gender Equality Congress comprises twelve cabinet members and twelve academics, and is chaired by the Chief Cabinet Secretary. The Prime Minister also sits in on some of the meetings. As a result, the Congress represents a cross-section of all ministries and agencies concerned with the promotion of gender equality policies. The Gender Equality Bureau, which aims to promote in a most efficient manner consistent policy implementation, has the planning capabilities as well as the administrative organs for coordinating amongst ministries. The key position is held by the Chief Cabinet Secretary, and this facilitates integrating policies into relevant ministries and agencies. The scope of its policies covers both men and women, and as a result, we need to change the awareness of men if we wish to reform society structurally.

With regard to challenges, various Government measures are needed if we are to realize a gender-equal society. Understanding of the significance of these measures and the ideal
society we strive towards has yet to fully penetrate central and local government and amongst academics and intellectuals. There is a need to promote awareness among both men and women, as there is a major gap in general as well as between the private and public sectors. We need to take strategic measures in order to overcome this. The Basic Law has been in place for less than two years and less than one year has passed since reorganization of the Central Government into a stronger structure for promoting such measures. The Government needs to stress the significance of forming a gender-equal society in a most tangible manner in policy platforms as well as in statements that deliver basic policy platforms.

Secondly, we need to clearly identify the beneficiaries. We need to remove the misunderstanding amongst men that these measures only apply to the female population. Currently, we have a very severe economic recession in which men are often the only bread earners for their families. We need to clearly state that men are also covered under these policies, and by doing so we can enhance the base of support from both sexes. Large-scale involvement of men in the process is important as both sexes can benefit from the policies being firmly in place.

Mainstreaming policy comprises a third strategy. Even amongst some administrators, gender equality policies are only recognized to be a minor stream of policies. The importance of economic policies, employment policies, welfare related policies and social security are usually stressed, and therefore, tying gender-equal policies with them is necessary. In doing so we need to quantify to the greatest extent possible and in most specific terms, the significance of important policy issues that relate to gender equality. This is what I mean by gender mainstreaming. How does a given policy affect personal and individual spending and consumption as well as how will it affect tax revenues and social security premium inflows? This comprises mainstreaming or integrating gender equality policies, and we need to promote policies that invite further participation of females in the labor market as well as policies that facilitate harmonizing work for females and child rearing, in terms of their maternity leave and other systems that support these undertakings. We need to stress that gender mainstreaming benefits everyone. Given the aging population and the projected diminishing labor force, we need to work out how to maintain a social security system within the given environment, especially since a number of the male population are being laid off in the restructuring of corporate activities due to the severe recession. We need to stress that realization of a gender-equal society provides a solution to all these pending issues.

Fourthly, system reform and enhancing public awareness does not present an easy task as it
is deeply rooted in family values, traditional values, and social practices. It is time consuming to change attitudes because it involves to some extent generational differences. It is important to drastically change the system, but also to make it more operational so as to make the most effective use of the system in place. Both systems and attitude change should be aimed for at the same time. For example, we need to be most attentive in implementing and operating existing maternity and paternity leave laws, and systems to secure people to fill in for people who take leave.

Strategy number five is to provide financial backing and assistance, as this has an immediate effect. The Council for Gender Equality has been making suggestions and reports to this end. Special consideration for budget allocation needs to be voiced through Cabinet decision as this has in the past added substantially to the finances of policy implementation with regard to gender equality. The strategic importance of this needs to be further stressed.

Strategy number six is how to promote partnership. The Central Government only has limited human and financial resources, but collaboration is essential if we are to further penetrate awareness amongst local municipalities and NGOs. We also need to take measures that fit the context of each region and community. We need to check the extent to which measures have been advancing and making progress, and we need to introduce competition amongst local governments as a means of informing them of policies that are gender neutral and serve gender equality.

Last but not least, we need to provide on a continuous manner an appropriate evaluation scheme for the effectiveness of policies. We need to introduce a result-oriented prospective. Given that both human and financial resources are limited, we need to pinpoint the most effective strategies. As we advance, the effectiveness of the measures will vary and change, so continuous review is necessary.

I do hope this will provide some kind of background to the Japanese situation.